DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 480 EA 030 276

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TITLE Motivations for School Board Membership: Implications for Superintendents and District Accountability.
PUB DATE 1999-10-00
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration (Minneapolis, MN, October 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; *Administrator Attitudes; Board Administrator Relationship; Board Candidates; *Boards of Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *Governance; *Participative Decision Making; *Politics of Education; Superintendents

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how motivations for school-board membership influence individual board member's agendas. It suggests the implications of individual agendas for board dynamics and superintendents when both must be accountable to state and federal mandates and their own district's desire to collaborate to improve academic achievement for all children. Data for the report were obtained through traditional qualitative methods. Ten school-board members (five males, five females) participated in open-ended interviews. Triangulation through interviews with the superintendents of the participants' districts and with colleagues of the participants was also performed. Interviews were supplemented with the examination of board minutes and voting patterns. Three key findings emerged from the study: (1) board members motivated by personal agendas were more likely to micromanage--an approach that appeared to inhibit collaborative processes and full board participation in decision making; (2) "reformers" were more likely to make decisions in a collaborative manner--sample board members who were placed in the reformer quadrant were more likely to empower others in decision making; and (3) some board members felt they had lost equal input and voice to single-issue board members, expressing concern that the personal-agenda board members pushed too hard for rapid change without considering all factors first. (Contains 24 references.) (RJM)

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MOTIVATIONS FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERSHIP: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPERINTENDENTS AND DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY

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When a fundamental shift of mind occurs, our sense of identity shifts, too, and we begin to accept each other as legitimate human beings. (Jaworski, 1996, p.11)

School board members with special interest agendas are referred to as activists in the literature. These activist are products of communities that are committed to exerting influence over school activities (McCurdy, 1992). Often these school board members are more interested in exerting control rather than seeking all multiple sources of input before making decisions and such action can create turbulent board dynamics. Power struggles may emerge between board members who seek to be accountable to state and federal accountability initiatives and other board members who wish to advance personal agendas. This is just one example of how motivations for school board membership can influence accountability issues. Understanding motives for school board membership, then, is critical for superintendents who wish to move board members beyond single-issue concerns toward broader goals and accountability.

Through qualitative research methods we examine how motivations for school board membership influence individual board member's agendas and further suggest possible implications that individual agendas have for board dynamics and superintendents

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when both must be accountable to: 1) state and federal mandates; and 2) their own district's desire to collaborate to improve academic achievement for all children.

Review of Literature

The brief review of literature has three major components: 1) a summary of school board member selection and a general profile of school board members; 2) highlights of research studies focused on motivation for school board membership; and 3) a discussion of how motivations for school board membership can affect the politics of school board/superintendent decision making.

Selection and Profiles of School Board Members

Problems in the Selection of School Board Members

Historically, the influential and respected citizens in a community were elected or appointed to school boards (Cronin, 1973; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Kimbrough, 1964). However, over the last 30 to 40 years, "many influential and respected citizens reportedly are reluctant to serve as school board members because of the seemingly endless and often petty controversies that engulf public school boards. When well-intentioned citizens are elected to boards, they may quickly become frustrated when they are swept up in a variety of volatile issues that frequently have little or nothing to do with the formulation and implementation of educational policy" (Danzberger & Usden, 1992, p. 99). Given these frustrations, it is not surprising that the numbers of those who seek school board membership are shrinking.

Adding to the difficulties mentioned above, low voter turnout in school elections is common except during times of referendum and controversy. In part, low voter turnout is a

price of non-partisan school politics. Perhaps the greatest problem of non-partisan politics is the absence of a formal nomination process (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970, p. 23). To be sure, in many districts the professional staff, especially the superintendent of schools, plays a key role in the recruitment of school board candidates who then never have to meet the requirements of a formal nomination system. Such recruitment practices can result in elite or narrowly focused slates of candidates for school board elections (Lutz & Merz, 1992; Danzberger & Usden, 1992; McCarty and Ramsey, 1971).

In addition, according to Lutz and Merz (1992, p. 4), various studies have shown that about half of the school board members in the United States are elected unchallenged and another sizable segment is appointed by fellow board members during non-election times of the year. These practices enable segments of the community to exert considerable power and control over educational resources which, in turn, opens doors to those who wish to serve only to advance personal agendas.

Profiles of School Board Members

In the spring of 1985, sixteen states participated in the implementation of the Institute for Educational Leadership's (IEL) school board self-assessment, improvement, and planning process. This assessment process was developed in cooperation with 14 different state school board associations. The IEL (1986), reports that the emerging profile of professional board members' springs from a new self-image. The philosophical orientation of current board members varies considerably from that of traditional,board members. Traditional board members most often saw themselves as institutional trustees. Now, according to the IEL (1986), greater numbers serve for more personal reasons. These individual orientations can influence the interactions of the board and superintendent, and

subsequent decision-making, district management, and policy formation (Danzberger & Usden, 1992, p. 64).

Another important aspect included in the IEL report (1986), noted that the most current profiles of people who seek and hold school board offices today, demonstrate an activist tendency. These activists-members are products of communities who are committed to exerting a strong influence over school districts. Activists-members carry their inclinations into board service. They often act as strong change agents, not accepting the status quo, or query into the minute details of district operations (McCurdy, 1992).

Finally, the IEL (1986), reported that baby boomers are filling greater numbers of board seats. These board members tend to exhibit strong activist behavior. They want to participate in organizations that give them access to socially worthwhile activities and come with a sincere desire to make a difference (Mc Curdy, 1992).

> Unfortunately, baby boomers as a group often have difficulty working together. They can be impatient, demanding, and value-conscious. They are quite used to having their own way. They demand highly personalized, high-quality services. According to the IEL (1986) report, these members expect to be actively involved in shaping progress, policy, and procedures. Baby boomers reared in an environment of instant gratification often insist on satisfying all desires at once. They believe firmly in participatory management, but if they don't own a policy decision, they tend not to support programs to implement it. Their sophisticated and time-consuming demands are draining the energy and the patience of school executives (McCurdy, 1992, p 52).

On the positive side, according to the IEL (1986) survey, these new board members are the most highly educated board members in history. Perhaps, because they are such inveterate education consumers they will not accept less than an active role in setting educational policy and they don't mind using micromanagement tactics to implement these policies (McCurdy, 1992; IEL 1986; The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force, 1992).

Research on Motivations for School Board Membership

Motivations for school board membership has generally been categorized three ways; civic, personal, or those who serve to as representatives of special interest groups. Donald J. McCarty's 1950 study of board members, described by Robert F. Campbell and his associates in their book, *The Organization and Control of American Schools* (1990), found that 54 percent of board members interviewed expressed self-oriented motivations for seeking office and were interested in achieving personal goals or in representing special interest groups. The other 46 percent had community-oriented motives for advancing objectives of the school systems. Some saw board membership as desirable because it would lead to political advancement, offer personal prestige, or provide a means to plead the cause of special interest.

A qualitative study conducted in 1979 by Thomas Alby on the motivations for school board membership found (as reported by board members themselves) that the majority of the sample (40 percent) served on boards in order to correct an existing problem. Twenty-nine percent expressed that civic service was their motivation, and 3.8 percent proclaimed that recognition, prestige or personal ego led to board service. In addition, consistent with what Lutz and Merz found in 1992, Alby found that a large

portion of the sample, 37 percent, expressed no specific motive for board membership but had been recruited or persuaded by other individuals to run.

Interestingly, when the same questions as originally posed to school board members in Alby's study regarding motivation were posed to these sample board members' superintendents the results were much different. In the case of superintendent's responses, 31 percent indicated that board members were motivated by civic interest, 11 percent believed they were motivated by a need for political involvement and/or personal ego issues, and only 16 percent of the superintendent's reported that school board members had been recruited or persuaded by others to serve. In addition, superintendents reported that only six percent of the board members were motivated to serve because of problems that needed correction. A 34 percent discrepancy existed between the school board member's perceptions of their own motivations for service and the superintendent's perception of the school board member's motivation for service. This discrepancy was a clear indication that motivations for membership were not exposed or fully understood at the time of election or appointment by either superintendents or board members.

Politics Behind School Board Member/Superintendent Dynamics

In a study of twelve school districts conducted by Susan Moore Johnson in 1996, decision making by boards was described as either fitting into participatory politics or patronage politics. Participatory politics was described as boards who make decisions based around particular issues rather than according to interest groups, such as hockey clubs, local businesses, or special education teachers, rather than long term alliances. In patronage politics, decisions are based on long term alliances. Positions that are taken and resources

that are distributed are done so on the basis of personal connections, including friendships, race, ethnicity, neighborhoods and age old friendships.

Clearly, it is possible, that at any given time and for any given policy issue or administrative decision, inequality of influence can be the rule. Lutz and Iannaccone (1969), support this possibility by finding that:

> However mutable a social system engaged in policy-making there may be a tendency toward repetitive behavior and the process of influence does exist. Consequently, it is possible to identify individuals within groups, groups within a network of groups, and particular social units within large complex social systems that, over periods of time, are more influences than others are. Once this is done distinctions between influential within the same social unit, whether a group or a more complex organizational stem facilitate the study of influence, and help explain the nature of the base of potential power behind them (Iannaccone & Lutz, p. 12, 1970).

Lutz and Iannaccone (1970), further describe how these linkages of formal and informal social systems surface within the school setting and further relate to legal powers of the state. They write:

> Pupils in classrooms display informal organization in their interpersonal relationships that function as small but significant power systems. Similarly, classroom teachers and other school personnel produce power systems that influence and help explain the nature of the base of potential power behind them. These are sometimes unions, and sometimes teacher groups that are not formally recognized. Linkages of these power systems occur from building to building and impinge upon the central office and the school board. Interlocking with such informal networks there exist a web of

formal offices, groups and organizations that dispose of the legal power of the state (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970, p.32).

The linkage points between formal and informal organizations in education constitute important centers of attention for those who would understand social power in educational decision-making with respect to empowering others. According to Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970), there are a number of diverse publics, and each member of a school board should not be expected to represent one of these publics but rather to represent as many different roles as they fill in their own lives.

Research Methods and Design

Traditional qualitative methods were used to examine how individually held motivations for school board membership, ranging from single-issue motivations to more altruistic or global motivations can influence decisions made by school board members as well as district-wide accountability. In this section, we describe the sample selection, data gathering, and data analysis.

Sample Selection

Ten school board members-five males and five females from a northern state were chosen as participants for this study. The sample of participants was established through: 1) superintendent recommendation, 2) identification of members who had served at least one year on a school board, 3) informed consent of the participant, and 4) time and logistical constraints. Length of board membership ranged from one to 15 years. Seven of the ten participants had children in their respective districts at the time of the study.

The occupations of the participants varied; homemaker (1), nurse (1), retiree (1), realtors (2), entrepreneurs (2), managers at local businesses (3). Four of the ten had

education backgrounds including: a teacher, a school secretary, a special education director, and a school administrator. Subjects' ages ranged from 40-69 years old. These demographics compare closely to the data collected by the National Center for Educational Information collected between 1988-1999.

Data Gathering

Interviews were open-ended in order to elicit rich description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and were recorded and later transcribed. Triangulation through interviews with the superintendent of the participant's districts and colleagues of the participants was performed in order to strengthen the validity of the data. Written documents such as board minutes and voting patterns were also examined. All interviews were an hour to two hours in length.

In order to determine the participants' mission and agenda for school board service, the following lead questions were asked: 1) Is there story behind the reason you originally ran for the school board? 2) Talk about the school reform efforts that you advanced and supported? 3) Why were these particular reforms important to you? 4) Do you feel you make decisions differently now than when you first became a school board member? If so, how has your decision-making process changed? 5) What gives you the greatest satisfaction and dissatisfaction while working as a school board member? During the interview, probes were used to establish how motivations and special interests effected the relationship participants had with their superintendent.

Data Analysis

In keeping with established methods of qualitative research (Bogden & Bilken, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss,

1987) data analysis was continuous, and took place at many levels for different reasons. Reciprocity was practiced (Lather, 1991) and participants were asked for feedback to the researchers' interpretations of interviews and emerging themes.

Transcripts were coded to highlight possible motivations as well as decision-making patterns of the participants. In order to verify the coding process, two district administrators were given a form containing pre-assigned codes and asked to follow the same procedure for coding, as did the researcher. Each administrator was given three non-identical transcripts to code to cover six transcripts in all. The two coders and researcher agreed on ninety percent of the coding.

Using the coded data, two continuums relating to possible motivations for school board membership emerged: 1) the participant's motivation to serve initially on the school board from a "single issue" on a continuum to more altruistic, global reasons, and 2) the participant's overall mission for school board membership-maintaining the status quo on a continuum to acting as change agents. A third continuum relating to the styles of participants' decision-making styles also emerged. Participants were plotted on each continuum based on their responses to the driving questions and the triangulated data.

In order to increase validity of this study, the two coders were asked to plot five of the ten participants on the continuums. The triangulated data was used as a checkpoint for placement on the continuums by the researcher and coders. Higher than 90% percent agreement with the researcher suggested that a valid process was in place for placement of participants on continuums.

Next, a 2x2 matrix (see Figure 1) was created by crossing the initial motivation agenda continuum with the overall mission continuums. Categorical descriptors naming the

motivations inherent within the interrelated mission and agenda continuums were added to each quadrant of the matrix: personal agenda, reformers, ego safe keepers and stabilizers. The style of decision-making continuum (voiceless, micro-manager, empowerers) was created as a tool for further analysis and served as a backdrop for the matrix. Participants were plotted on the matrix quadrants in a way that reflected the narrative data. This tool was useful when analyzing the data for implications related to accountability. The matrix analysis tool suggested that 90 percent of the subjects plotted were in the personal agenda or social reformer quadrants. Ten percent were in the ego safe keeper quadrant while none were plotted in the stabilizer quadrant.

In addition, focus groups consisting of several superintendents from Wisconsin were conducted using many of the same questions that were posed to the board members and superintendents of the this study. Their responses help to validate and inform this study.

Findings and Discussion of Findings

The study's findings and discussions are guided by interpretive methods. These methods are employed to analyze narrative data in an effort to gain better understanding of underlying motivations for school board membership. Included with each finding, are example narratives from the board members, which help clarify the connections between board members motivations and the way they made decisions.

Finding 1 - Board members motivated by personal agendas were more likely to micromanage – something that appeared to inhibit collaborative processes and full board participation in decision-making.

Board members in this study who were motivated to serve so they could correct what they believed to be an existing problem (Alby, 1979) -- referred to in this paper as

single issue or personal agenda board members -- responded to interview questions using language that suggested they used micromanagement tactics to advance their own agendas. In other words, they used micromanagement tactics to force decisions that satisfied their personal agendas. In fact, three board members in this study who were placed in the extreme corner of the Personal Agenda quadrant were also classified as powerful micromanagers (see Figure 1). Many of these board members said they felt responsible for setting broad policy, but often, probes into these responses revealed something far different than setting broad policy. In support of this finding, McCurdy (1992), and Poston (1994), report that some new members seem to be almost obsessed with one concern to the exclusion of other issues such as state mandates which districts are being held increasingly accountable.

In addition the IEL (1986), survey found that not only are superintendents concerned about single-issue agendas, but board members themselves, educators, and the public were highly concerned about members with single constituencies or issues. At times single-issue members are later known to be members or supporters of pressure groups with "special interests". The IEL (1986) further reported that many board members complained increasingly that their colleagues represented special interest groups and that the trusteeship concept of representing the entire community had been weakened.

Board members interviewed for this study often expressed concern over the interests of board colleges. They were concerned that some board members focused on single issues or support of specific constituencies rather than the diverse issues of the district. They often described their fellow board members as micromanagers and expressed that they seemed to feel a need to micromanage because they did not trust their superintendent to take care of

the day to day operations. During an interview, one board member commented on what he thought to be the agendas of other board members and why they run for school board. He was very concerned about the narrow focus of some school board members. He stated:

> *I think many of our schools are run -- you know I shouldn't make categorical statements but I've witnessed in my 40 years of exposure to education -- it seems a lot of our schools are run by people who have an ax to grind. They have an issue, they have a teacher they don't like, want to get rid of, they have a program that they want to deal with and they have a very narrow focus of what their goal is as a school board member. And I don't think they have the big picture in mind as to the real need to be a part of a governing body that promotes education*

Another board member implied during our interview that she felt a need to be visible in the district and wanted closer contact with the district and administrator. This board members' perception of her role on the board led others, including the administrator of this district to view her as a micromanager. She put it this way:

> *Why do I stay on that board? I wasn't going to run this last time and my husband has this belief that as long as I'm on the board things will be better for my kids. But my kids do fine whether I'm on the board or not. It does give me an opportunity to keep in closer contact. You know I'm visual, I'm there. I know a lot of the teachers on a personal level. The administrator and I - I mean she came to our daughter's wedding last summer.*

One board member commenting on a fellow board member and his tendency to become dictatorial in decision making and his desire to micromanage reflected:

We all start cringing when he likes to speak up but he comes from a perspective that none of us have. He's a retired professional very militaristic attitude but diligent and very caring. He likes to be dictatorial, he likes to micromanage, and tell people what to do step by step. We tolerate some of that because we know that within in speeches he has some good thoughts, and we then let him go for a while and we lead back into those issues of where he's coming from without having him try to dictate the solutions.

These narratives suggest that the board members in this study do not always concentrate on policymaking, state mandates, and district accountability. In fact, these issues do not appear anywhere in their narratives. Thus, an adversarial relationship can occur between the superintendent and board members when single-issue agendas and district accountability efforts are not in alignment. According to McCurdy (1992, p. 53), the divisiveness that such members create can become a major factor affecting board effectiveness, community perceptions and reform efforts targeted to creating a more collaborative culture. Dealing with details and trivia of operations distracts the board, as a collaborative team, from the opportunity and chance to fuel the organization with hopes, inspiration, dream, or vision.

Finding 2 – "Reformers" were more likely to make decisions in a collaborative manner. Sample board members who were placed in the reformer quadrant were more likely to empower others in decision making. A pattern of soliciting information from parents, staff, and students often emerged when analyzing their narratives.

For example, one board member who was placed in the "reformer" quadrant stated the following about decision making:

You should try to work towards consensus of opinion. Let everyone have their say and then try to summarize what people have said so you can see where they fit together, rather than having everyone have 5 different viewpoints for 5 different people and never coming together.

Another board member commented on what she thought was good leadership when she said:

In other words, a good leader is one who empowers others.

During a different interview, one board member expressed the importance of not becoming involved with the day to day operations and clearly saw this as the role of the administrator. As he said:

We are not educators, we are not trained by-and-large as being educators and we have no business making those decisions that trained people, school people or knowledgeable people should be making the decisions. Again, that's why you hire an administrator or a principal and you have to rely upon their competence, their training and their judgment and their wisdom and all the things that make it easy for you to accept their recommendation.

This data supports the research conducted by Alby (1979) and Lutz and Merz (1992) when they found that there are board members who see their role in a broader sense. However, only 40 percent of the board members interviewed for this study perceived their role as global rather than personal. In addition, only 20 percent of these same board members, who were motivated for global reasons, expressed that they made decisions in a collaborative or empowering manner.

This finding is consistent with Danzberger & Usden (1992, p. 103), "There is an elusive but definite sense that school board service is not attracting the civic and business leaders who have political influence as it once did in many communities." Therefore, policy formation at the state level, often lacks the important input of civic and business leaders regarding school reform and policy formation. These citizens, referred to as "reformers", in this study of who expressed a belief in collaborative processes in decision making, were also civic or business leaders in their communities. In urban school districts particularly, there is a perceived loss of access to civic power bases as influential citizens, for a variety of reasons, opt not to serve on local school boards.

Further, many people interviewed for the IEL (1986), study felt that the pipeline of talented and influential community volunteers who might have served on local boards and act a "reformers" in the past is closing down as highly educated women, in particular, pursue paid jobs in business and other professions (Danzberger, et al, 1992). It would seem plausible that it is these "reformers" who would be inclined acknowledge district accountability efforts. As "reformers" lose seats on school boards to single issue candidates, social reform agendas could be replaced with single-issue agendas, thus stagnating undivided district growth.

Finding 3 - Some board members in this study felt they had lost equal input and voice to single-issue board members. These board members expressed concern that the personal-agenda board members pushed too hard for rapid change without considering all factors first. This left some board members feeling as though their opinion was not heard or valued. They tended to feel "voiceless" and excluded from decision making.

For example, one board member felt overpowered by fellow board members. He stated:

> *So, when I came on the board, I felt pressured to just shut off and say yes, okay. And that certain individuals, again, because they had been here awhile, or whatever. You know, I just sort of felt bulldozed over and they just made the decision. Once I was told to shut up and not even question the decisions that were being made. And then it sort of was like there were some factions that developed on the Board. The two new Board Members, and myself aligned together against, and I really use this word very deliberately, against, not in a personal way, but sort of in a political way, against the three existing board members. And we were viewed as the troublemakers and stopping the process of making decisions and going forward and why were we asking these questions. So when I get in a situation like that I fight even harder for what I believe, just because, you know, I don't like having my back up to a wall. I feel like I have the right to ask questions. I felt we had some good questions to ask whether they were hard questions, maybe they were uncomfortable, maybe they were the wrong questions.*

Another board member expressed the frustration of feeling voiceless and frustration with power struggles among board members when she said:

> *The frustration of knowing what it could be. Times when there is dissension, mistakes made, there's politics, there's pettiness, and there's a power struggle. Frustration when, like I said, I know what it could be and it's not. We have to get it there. The frustration of having to work within certain parameters that inhibit what we could be doing. But, you know, hey, that's reality. So, that's my frustration.*

Clearly, with a lack of interest from civic leaders or reformers to serve on school boards many community factions can become voiceless and single-issue members can verbally dominate. These single-issue candidates can push hard for rapid change and reject the status quo, often vying for "quick-fixes" and instant gratification to personal agendas while disregarding the district's need to be accountable to outside agencies. In fact, some board members may express such a strong interest in the operational activities of the district, or try to specialize in some aspect of an activity that they may impair district-wide governance efforts (Mc Curdy, 1992; Carver, 1991). This, in turn, creates unequal opportunity to speak at the board table when one board member feels as though she has become an "expert" in a certain operational activities of the district and therefore making collaboration around the board table difficult. It is important that board members be insured equal participation focused on district levels of accountability.

Conclusion

The process of examining the motivational forces is important in understanding group dynamics. If decisions are based on hidden or personal agendas and superintendents and other board members are micromanaged by single-issue board members, how can school governance overcome these obstacles to meet higher levels of accountability at state and federal levels?

It is unlikely that people motivated by personal agendas will cease to run for school boards. Therefore, exposing and transforming these agendas becomes a top priority for school superintendents. Districts could, in fact, publicly celebrate boards that work collaboratively and strive for undivided district reform. Influential and civic leaders may become more interested and vocal about educational reform if they witness a productive

and collaborative system. Breaking down superficial barriers between superintendents and board members by the mutual probing of deeper motives for service will help ensure this transformation and build the trust necessary to elicit open and honest communication.

According to Danzberger & Usden (1992, p. 123), school boards can provide important leadership for education if they step out of their all too common pattern of reflecting the status quo or their "mirror-like" representation of board members' often-conflicting constituencies. As elected or politically appointed lay leaders, they can broker and spearhead efforts to develop a much broader political base for public education in the challenging years aided by building bridges to general government, the business community, senior citizens, human service agencies, and other non-educational constituencies.

Perhaps if local boards can succeed in brokering efforts to develop broader political bases for public education, state legislators will feel less compelled to step in and preempt local discretion related to instructional services. If so, local districts might not only have more control and less standardization, but may become empowered to create local reform initiatives that could generate state policy.

As quoted at the beginning of this paper, "When a fundamental shift of mind occurs, our sense of identity shifts, too, and we begin to accept each other as legitimate human beings (Jaworski, 1999, p.12). Becoming accountable requires higher trust and greater alignment of priorities between board members and superintendents: a fundamental shift of mind.

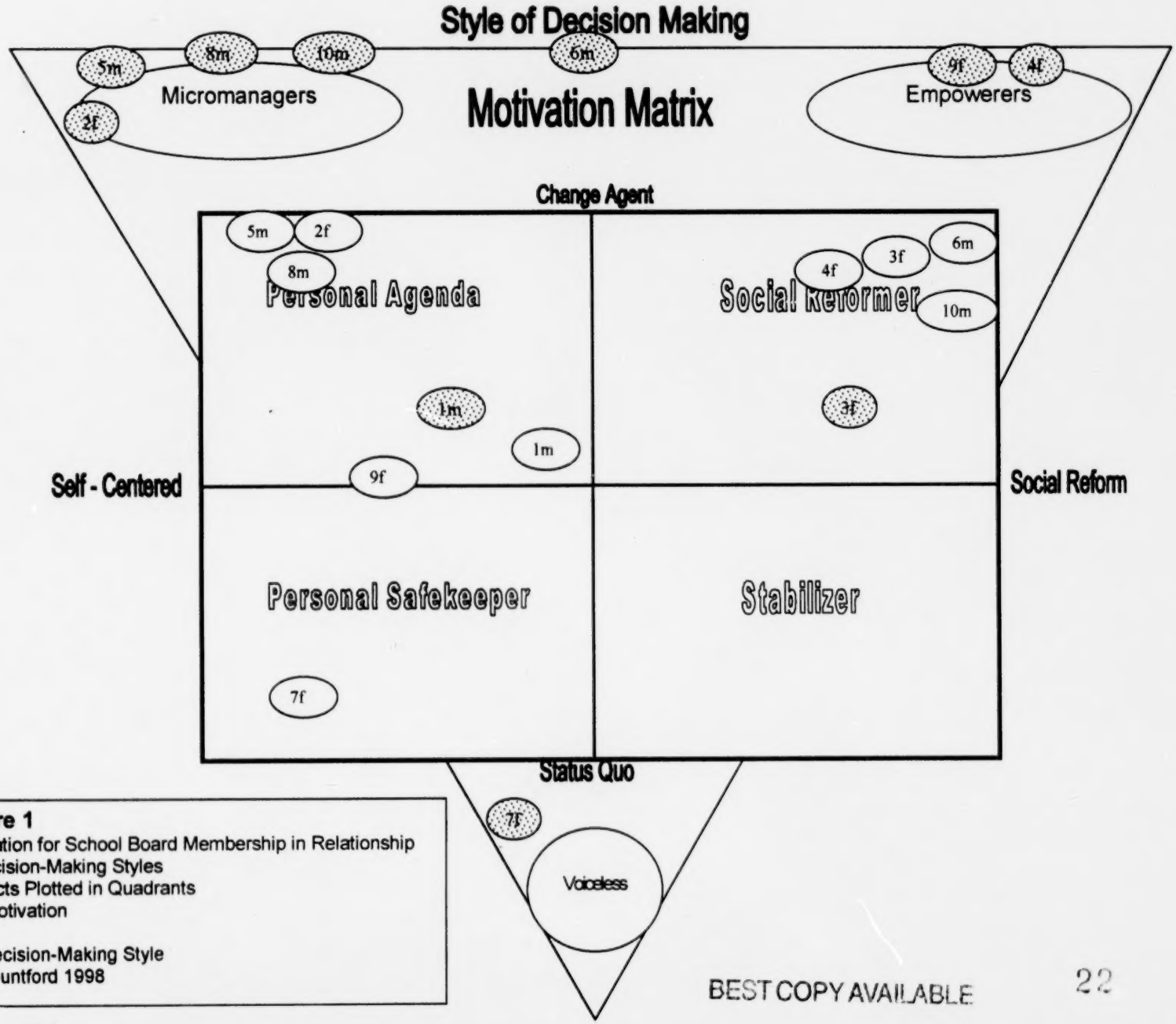

Figure 1
Motivation for School Board Membership in Relationship to Decision-Making Styles
Subjects Plotted in Quadrants
◯ Motivation

◯ Decision-Making Style
M. Mountford 1998

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